AFTERWORD:

WHO RULES THIS SAUSAGE FACTORY?

Neil Smith*

... [A] schoolmaster is a productive labourer, when, in addition to belabouring the heads of his scholars, he works like a horse to enrich the school proprietor. That the latter has laid out his capital in a teaching factory, instead of a sausage factory, does not alter the relation.

— Karl Marx (1867)

A lot of sausage meat has passed through the grinder since Marx made this wry observation portraying teachers as wage workers and students as education’s commodities. When I first read this passage in the 1970s it rang so true regarding universities that I have remembered it vividly ever since. Little did I imagine that the dramatic transformation of academia in the 1980s and 1990s would intensify not only Marx’s prescience but also the acute contradictions that many of us experience as labourers in the higher education sausage factory at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

The papers in this special edition of Antipode cover many of the issues involved in the rapid corporatization that has transformed higher education, providing historical context, biting critique, and a hint of political alternatives. The epic 1999–2000 student strike at Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico (UNAM) and parallel simmering struggles at places like the City University of New York (CUNY) highlight the stakes. From Stockholm to Sydney, Seoul to Sao Paulo, university systems that in the 1970s felt themselves to be providing a public service now scramble to reinvent themselves as emblems of corporate organization.

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The corporatization of the university is a global issue, and its effects are already present among us.

The causes of this phenomenon are not difficult to discern. The commodification of social relations lies at the heart of corporatized education. Since the 1970s, global neoliberalism has been both accomplished and accompanied by a dramatic deepening and extension of the commodification of social relations. Whole new economic sectors, from computers to the Internet, have opened fresh destinations for capital; existing sectors have been entirely reinvented. Explosive growth in biotechnology and bioprospecting provide evidence of the fact that nature has become an accumulation strategy, far more intensely than ever before (Haraway, 1997; Katz, 1998). Something very similar is happening in education, not just at the university level but throughout. As late as 1990, education in the United States represented to major capital investors a social service that, with varying degrees of efficiency, produced a reservoir of future available labour. By 2000, the education “sector” represented a $700 billion investment opportunity.

The first major shift in this direction came with the establishment of the Edison School Project, which, with a corporate-style salary and generous stock options, managed to lure ex-Yale President Benno Schmidt to spearhead a corporate privatization of schools and school districts. By the beginning of 2000, Edison Schools Inc. operated 79 schools in 16 states and was contemplating a $170 million stock offering. Like that of its Internet counterparts in the brave new Alice-in-Wonderland world of corporate finance, Edison’s success could be measured by its proud losses: $113 million since its inception, including $50.5 million for 1999.

Edison may have been the first large entrepreneur offering total educational management, but by the end of the 1990s there was a veritable stampede of such organisations (K. Mitchell, 1999). For example, the University of Phoenix is only the first largely web-based “university” aimed at working adults. As if to confirm the commodification of education that these and other organisations represent, Michael Milken—the junk bond salesman imprisoned in the early 1990s for insider trading—has started his own fleet of education companies under the name Knowledge Universe. Knowledge Universe lives up to its name; its ventures include everything from educational toys to language classes, a day-care “chain” and corporate computer training. Dozens of other highly capitalized companies are refashioning the education “sector.” A promotional conference for education investors—starring Benno Schmidt—advertised itself as follows: “Is Higher Education for Sale? You bet it is. And everyone—from corporations, non-profits and government agencies—wants a piece of it. How do you take advantage of market-driven education?” (quoted in Yates, 2000:42) One seminar at that conference promised to reveal “What the Market Wants.” As one education investor has put it, the intent is to make education “the next health care”—a deeply chilling prospect for
anyone who has had firsthand experience with the corporate health care industry in the US.

Long before currency exchange rates and up-to-the-minute stock quotes adorned highway billboards, Marx was again prescient: he noted that “capital is a leveller” and that nothing is immune from potential commodification—neither ideas nor things, neither honour nor reputation (Marx, 1967:397). However, the capitalization of education is a highly uneven process and not entirely new. Investor-driven innovations like Edison and Knowledge Universe may yet be specific to the United States, which has a long history of corporate intervention in education, especially through the sciences. The original Edison Laboratories (now Bell Labs), which date back to the nineteenth century, pioneered the kind of industrial science that emerged in the US after World War I. The so-called military-industrial state of the post-World War II period embraced a new corporatization of scientific research closely tied to the defense industry. Part of the educational world has always willingly collaborated with such corporatization. The difference today lies in the fact that education as a discrete industrial sector is in the process of being swallowed whole by finance and venture capital.

The corporatization of education is also happening outside the US, often in different ways and often with even more visible effects. Take, for example, the apparent decline in the quality of academic writing coming out of Britain. My early education came in a Scottish university, my later schooling in the United States. I have been teaching in US universities for almost two decades, during most of which time I have also been editing English-language geography books and journals. When I began teaching in the early 1980s, my US colleagues commonly believed that British students and authors were far more erudite writers than their US counterparts. That now seems to have changed: as many journal editors will agree, among papers submitted to geography journals since the early 1990s, the quality of writing from the UK has diminished precipitously. (Such broad comparisons are difficult and do not at all reflect on specific individuals, of course.)

There are undoubtedly numerous reasons for this, primary among which may be the repercussions of the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) inaugurated under Margaret Thatcher. The RAE stands as possibly the most direct corporate remake of academia internationally. Departments and universities owe their fate—their ability to lure students, funding, eligibility for grants, and potentially their continued existence—to the results of the RAE, which compares composite quantitative measures of academic “productivity” (published articles amassed plus grant money garnered plus conferences attended plus students taught, etc.). The RAE institutionalizes the accumulation of academic capital as the modus vivendi for universities. Articles in refereed (international) journals represent a kind of gold standard against which other products are
valued in the hierarchy of academic commodities. Published lists of citation tables represent the stock quotes for academic labour. And, as the deadline for the next RAE looms, a frenzy of *curriculum vitae* buying and selling (akin to Wall Street raiding) ensues. Every journal editor has dealt with papers submitted by desperate authors who, citing RAE pressure, want to know if their paper can be turned around in a few weeks and published a couple of months later. Parallel with the decline in writing quality is the erosion of security in the face of the RAEs.

Creeping commodification is not always this obvious, and it affects and infects us all. For example, the very citation system I use in this essay treats knowledge and ideas as discretely identifiable commodities, akin to bits of information (Gregory, 1990a, 1990b). This so-called “Harvard system” of referencing developed first within the sciences, where it facilitated the efficient referencing of specific laboratory “results.” Its virtual ubiquity now in the social sciences, even among supposedly “political” scholars and journals, implicates us all in a stunning lack of self-reflexivity about the commodification of ideas.

In addition to commodification, however, the corporatization of education has other signs and causes. Why, for example, has it happened so intensely at the end of the twentieth century when, notoriously (sciences and professional schools notwithstanding), education has largely rebuffed or otherwise survived earlier incursions of corporate ambition? Insofar as the purpose of education is traditionally to train a national labour force, there seems little doubt that the contemporary reinvention of education as a potentially lucrative sector for financial investment is intimately related to the fate of national states in the global political and cultural economy. It has been widely predicted, especially from the perspective of combined myopia and utopia that characterizes so much global financial projection today, that globalization would bring the end of the nation state. Although clearly an exaggeration verging on falsehood, this is prompted by a very real shift in the function and role of the Euro-American nation-state that is linked to so-called globalization. The point is not that these nation-states are fading away but that the relationship between capital and the state is becoming more intimate at the same time as the state executes a strategic withdrawal from some of its erstwhile responsibilities for social reproduction.

Thatcher, Kohl, and Reagan, Clinton, Blair, and Schroeder—even Mitterand and Jospin—have broadly shared the same strategy for remaking the state. Whether conservative or social democrat, they have all found in the wake of unprecedented global migration that their “national” economies no longer depend to such an extent on locally or nationally reproduced labour power, and that global competition over locations for the investment of capital provides all the ideological grist in the world for slashing social welfare programs. The rescaling of political geography becomes the means and motive for a more authoritarian state (Swyngedouw, 1996). For radicals, globalization does not mean that we can further
ignore the state. On the contrary, it intensifies the urgency of revivified theories of the state.

Education is simultaneously an act of social production and one of reproduction. Given this, it is perhaps unsurprising that, at a time when the relationship between these two things is being recast globally, education is also “on the block.” In part this is a question of scale politics. Rather than being national, the overall conditions of social reproduction are simultaneously local and global, which directly affects education (Smith, 1993). In the Euro-American world, the crisis in education in the last decades of the twentieth century has arguably been most acute in the United States, the nerve center of globalization. There, the loosened connection between education and national economic growth produced a spiralling dialectic of decline. Myriad capitalist complaints about the illiteracy of high school graduates justified as much as responded to the abandonment of education as a vital social service, while at the same time creating the desperate pent-up demand for private “solutions.”

The struggle against the corporatization of academia, therefore, needs to be inclusive rather than narrowly based. Resistance to the corporate school has to be seen in the context of these wider global shifts. This is especially true because the corporatization is so inherently uneven. In social terms it represents a powerful reassertion of class divisions in academia, often expressed in terms of race, ethnicity, or citizenship status. US professional schools—business, engineering, medical, law, and others—are already to corporate capital what West Point is to the US Army. Annual tuition fees and expenses at professional schools can exceed $40,000, and the dissolution of affirmative action regulations in many states crystalizes the class, race, and gender selectivity that this high cost of entry already enforces. Such schools and their related graduate and undergraduate faculties are already thoroughly private, enjoying high public subsidies via (among other things) the lion’s share of federal research grants, and their corporatization is less traumatic than in so-called public institutions. (It probably makes little other than symbolic difference that the prestigious Johns Hopkins University Hospital and Medical School has renamed itself The Johns Hopkins Health System.)

The brunt of corporatization is felt by previously public universities, in the US and elsewhere. The strike at UNAM in 1999–2000 ended in a tragic defeat plucked from the jaws of victory, in large part due to manipulation and provocation by Mexico’s ruling political party, the PRI. (However, in the beginning the strike galvanized major resistance to privatizing Mexico’s flagship public university and even succeeded in stopping its corporatization, at least in the short term.) The earlier conversion of Britain’s polytechnics into their own kind of sausage factories is now being played out in milder fashion in the US, where the adoption of flashy corporate strategies such as TQM (Total Quality Management) is having a bifurcated effect on the fate of public universities: while some survive
the TQM onslaught, others find themselves downsized toward a lower common denominator, “skill transference experience.” (As in any good industrial sector, educational corporations now apparently live or die according to “management,” “bottom lines,” and “student outcomes.”) Throughout, the education is increasingly vocational in the narrowest sense, while the expectations are reiterated in terms similar to private universities. For example, at CUNY in New York—long a bastion of working-class education—the destroyed public high school system has been made the scapegoat in an attempt to bar many students from university entrance. While funds for remediation have been cut in some places, money for learning English as a second language has escalated. The connection to the new globalism could hardly be clearer. While the local working class—especially black and Latino students, already victimized by a dysfunctional New York school system—are to be displaced from the public university, largely white immigrant groups from Russia and Eastern Europe, where high school education is arguably better, are welcomed as the basis of a new employment profile in the city.

In a brilliant critique of the vacuous corporate language of “excellence” that is now a mantra among university administrators (for whom “excellence” in parking service provision vies with “excellence” in Latin composition), the late Bill Readings (1997) draws a parallel between the crisis in higher education and the new role of the nation state. It is widely held that the German university of the nineteenth century, inspired and pioneered by German idealists from Kant to Wilhelm von Humboldt, set the pattern for the modern university. Readings concurs; with a strong humanities focus honed at the Université de Montréal, where he taught comparative literature, he argues that the modern university was integrated into civil society as the place where the idea of culture is worked out. In fact the university performs as the crucible in which specifically national cultures are bred, nurtured, and evolved. The struggles over Western civilization and “the (literary) canon” and the eventual culture wars of the 1990s are symptoms of the fact that the university has lost this function. He suggests that the “appeal to excellence occurs when the nation-state ceases to be the elemental unit of capitalism” and when universities are struggling for a different social rationale (Readings, 1997:44). The larger point applies: the new corporatization of the university is filling in a vacuum left by the diffusion of specifically national cultures and the increasing internationalization of culture.

In geography this corporatization has a particular personality. More than any other social science, geography was reinvented in the wake of the 1960s and early 1970s. By the 1980s, a discipline with only a faint radical past had become a significant focus for radical scholarship and activism and a conceptual reservoir, in part, for a spatialized language of politics that pervaded the social sciences and humanities. It is important to remember, however, that from Strabo to Alexander Humboldt to
present-day geography policy wonks, doing geography has been a practical pursuit, traditionally conceived in terms of eliciting knowledge that can perform as handmaiden to the state. Corporatization represents a refresh of traditional ambitions, rather than any new departure from them.

Apart from the more general external stimuli, the corporatization of geography in the 1990s has been lubricated by two main developments. The first is the explosion of geographical information technologies. Although there is a profound politics to the kinds of assumptions that get written into software algorithms, the issue with these technologies is less their specific natures than their reception within the discipline. The 1970s and 1980s must have seemed to curtail the promise of the quantitative revolution of the previous decade, particularly for those human geographers who were committed to a broadly positivist discipline. GIS technologies came online as a godsend to many who could not identify with the burgeoning of social theory in geography and did not share the successes social theorists were experiencing outside the field. The exaggerated enthusiasm with which GIS was received in many quarters represented a direct, if defensive, response to the closure of geography departments in the late 1970s and early 1980s and the apparent threat to the discipline as a whole. Many saw GIS as the technological knight on a white stallion that would rescue a discipline in distress. For those geographers working in social theory, the new economic or political geography, and urban and cultural theory, this disciplinary defensiveness no longer spoke to our experience; the discipline was already substantially renewed, and while GIS would prove useful for analyzing large data sets, that technical facility ought not to be taken for a disciplinary mission. But it was: GIS became the rallying cry behind which corporate ambitions and agendas were enthusiastically and powerfully directed into the empty vessel of disciplinary leadership. Technocracy became hopelessly confused with vision. Rather than a Luddite rejection of GIS technology itself, the core of this argument is that the lack of critical reflection for almost a decade on the implications of that technology, and the sectional, GIS-emboldened dismissal of huge parts of the discipline of geography which continues today (see Golledge, 1999) have cemented a largely corporate vision for the discipline as a whole. These actions repeat a destructive disciplinary tribalism that, while predictable—and predicted—will now be very difficult to undo, even if the will to do so is there.

This brings us to the second, related development facilitating the corporatization of geography: the development of business geography. The most intense ambitions for GIS were tightly hitched to a far more political project: in a sense, to take back the discipline from Marxists, feminists, and postmodernists (who could not be told apart by many of their critics). Business geography became the ideological phalanx on which this counterrevolution was mounted. The interest in GIS justified the inclusion of “business geography” as a legitimate subfield, while the existence of
business geography was used to promote GIS. The preponderance of GIS jobs in academic job advertisements in the 1990s was widely explained as “what the market wants.” In the Guide to Programs of the Association of American Geographers (AAG), “corporate members” such as the GIS giant Environmental Systems Research Institute Inc. (ESRI) are included alongside degree-granting colleges and universities, much as Latin and parking appear to share the aforementioned equivalent claims to excellence. Likewise, the 1998–1999 assault on the AAG Annals and Professional Geographer and the resulting restructuring of the journals’ “managements” represented a thinly veiled palace coup against a bastion of social theory influence in the discipline. A largely parallel struggle took place simultaneously in the American Anthropology Association. Business geography is precisely what it calls itself.

But it would be smug to assume that even a broadly defined, interdisciplinary, cultural politics alternative to the mainstream is immune from this creeping corporatism. Critiques of multiculturalism and postmodernism already implicate significant parts of cultural studies in new ideologies of power (Harvey, 1989; Mitchell, 1993), and Readings (1997) extends the argument. Cultural studies is less a new political departure than a strategic occupation of the vacuum left by the hollowing out of the state and the diffusion of the university’s purpose as progenitor of national cultures. Cultural studies claims authority over culture precisely at the time when culture is increasingly emptied of conceptual content (“what is remarkable about Cultural Studies as a discipline is . . . how little it needs to determine its object” [Readings, 1997:97]) and when culture has ceased to be the animating purpose of the university (see also Mitchell, 1995). On the one hand, therefore, “culture is no longer a matter of inclusion or exclusion” in a cultural core with less and less substantive existence (Readings, 1997: 111–12). On the other hand, this results in a kind of political disorientation which helps explain “why political piety is such a burning issue in Cultural Studies debates” (Readings, 1997:102). As others have suggested, we need to take this autocritique to heart, especially vis-à-vis a broadly conceived notion of critical geography (Barnett, 1998). As Readings (1997) notes in carefully chosen passive voice, political orientation is merely assumed, while the specific politics of the overall project we apparently agree on are actually opaque and amorphous. Social and cultural theory is thus not in itself necessarily a bulwark against the corporatization of the university. For example, avowedly critical approaches to new “democracies” in Eastern Europe or certain treatments of “critical” geopolitics are entirely compatible with geography’s traditional role of state building. There is nothing at all to prevent corporatism—and worse—from inhabiting the interstices of a murkyly defined “critical” geography.

Having said all this, it seems to me the gist of the essays here is that the sausage factory is worth fighting for. However, specific disciplines, departments, and universities are only as worthy of support as the kinds
of inquiries they permit us to make. If they cease allowing us to pursue the interesting questions, they lose intellectual and political value. There is no question that cultural studies carved a huge and important political wedge into a culturally narrow academy, and in its best incarnations has provided a lasting cultural politics. However, it is equally vital that such a politics continually reinvent itself according to changing circumstances. The same holds for geography, or for any given university, for that matter.

If I can be excused a political pitch by way of conclusion, it is for this reason that I think an International Critical Geography group makes the most sense today as a means to translate a critical politics into meaningful organization. Twenty years ago, the idea of an international critical geography group was barely thinkable, but even for radicals globalization has its up side. If we are successful, or lucky, or both, the idea will be obsolete twenty years from now. In the process, however, we shall have created something a lot more ambitious than a small international academic organization. I am convinced that all around the world nationally based flowerings of critical geography are looking for international and interdisciplinary connection. It is time we took our abstract theorizing seriously: jumping scales is so obviously the thing to do. With the International Geographical Congress as the only competitor, we are well ahead of the corporatist (and largely still nationally based) competition, but we will not be for long. The refusal of corporatism must be international from the start.

Politics is about making connections from person to person and place to place. The greatest turning points of twentieth-century leftist politics were all geographical. Stalin’s “socialism in one country” signalled the death of perhaps the most interesting, if short-lived and eventually tragic, political experiment of the century. Decolonization was about reclaiming the map from imperial powers. The feminist assertion of a body politics was deliberately and successfully spatial in the construction of a whole new political scale of political struggle. And a reconstructed environmental politics is about ensuring the beneficent substance of space at all scales. Personally, I am not convinced that any of these political ambitions can be achieved under the rubric of capitalism and its attendant institutions. Yet on a daily basis we all trek into the sausage factory. Some of us are the sausages, some of us put the sausage meat in skins, some of us just tend the machines, and some are the managers—but all of us are in Marx’s educational factory. The local branch of this factory serves as an excellent target for a little political agitation, but we also have to keep our sights focused on the larger sausage factory of global capitalism. Taking over that factory and operating it democratically is a globalization project we can all get behind.
References